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# 12 The Evolution of the Mushroom Industry in Kennett Square

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## **The Evolution of the Mushroom Industry in Kennett Square**

By Samuel E. Flammini, HIS480 (submitted June  
17, 1999)

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### **DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH TOPIC**

Over the past one hundred years, mushroom growing in Kennett Square has evolved from a minor sideline among area carnation growers to a multi-million dollar industry. Today mushrooms are the number one cash crop in the state of Pennsylvania. The state's output accounts for nearly half of the nation's total production (Art Reed Interview). Kennett Square has long been known as the birthplace of the mushroom industry. The small town, which is located about thirty miles south of Philadelphia on U.S. Route One, still holds claim to the title of "Mushroom Capital of the World". Throughout its history the mushroom industry has seen many changes in technology, marketing, production and labor. The industry has had to adapt to changing consumer tastes, government trade policies and a plethora of labor issues. Despite persistent threats to its prosperity the industry has survived and continues to grow at an unwavering pace.

In an attempt to understand the diverse issues that the mushroom industry has faced from its inception to the present, I utilized newspaper clippings from the files at the Chester County Historical Society, a database of Philadelphia Inquirer articles located on the internet and bound editions of the Kennett Paper at Bayard Taylor Memorial Library in Kennett Square. In addition to the use of print materials I also used a substantial amount of information collected in the course of several interviews conducted with significant players in mushroom community, including Friends of Farm Workers attorney Arthur Read, Christine Barber of *"The Daily Local News"*, the President of Kaolin Mushroom Farms (Michael Pia) and Gus Carmona-Earnst a graduate student and Mexican immigrant who has done extensive research on issues concerning the community of Mexican immigrants drawn to Kennett Square by the promise of work within the mushroom industry.

The American market for locally produced fresh mushrooms seems, at the moment, to be relatively stable. Having long since lost out to foreign competitors in the canned market, today's successful firms are those which can produce the greatest quantity of the highest quality fresh mushrooms and efficiently ship them to market. This trend toward larger and larger firms has led to a dramatic decrease in the overall number of industry growers and a substantial increase in the productive capacity of the firms that remain. What was once a predominately family operation is now big business. The smaller farms simply can't compete.

In recent years controversy has swirled around the mushroom industry in Kennett Square. The industry as a whole, and Kaolin Mushroom farms in particular have been the focal point of a labor movement seeking better conditions for the often abused predominantly migrant workforce utilized to harvest and pack the crop. Since the birth of mushroom farming in Chester County, the harvesting of mushrooms has been the job of those on the lowest rung of our nation's socioeconomic hierarchy for the mere fact that no one else is willing to do it. Inextricably intertwined in the current labor movement are sticky issues of immigration, court litigation, economic factors, discrimination and common human decency.

The mushroom industry in Kennett Square has survived countless assaults throughout its history and it will no doubt continue to survive into the foreseeable future. It is my contention however that the face of the industry, which has never been stable for long, will continue to change and adapt to the uncertain climate of the future. Like past generations, the current crop of Mexican migrant laborers will, as they become increasingly upwardly mobile, move on to more favorable economic opportunities. Considering the xenophobic attitudes harbored by a considerable number of Americans, and the unprecedented changes that could result from the organization of labor within the industry, it is difficult to predict just who will provide the labor force of the future.

## **THE "INS AND OUTS" OF MUSHROOM GROWING**

Prior to discussing in detail the history of mushroom growing, it is essential for one to understand the process of growing mushrooms. This section will serve as a crash course on the process of mushroom growing.

Mushrooms are grown in long windowless cinder block buildings. These buildings usually consist of two levels; an underground basement level, and a one story above ground level. Within these buildings are rows of wooden beds

usually 5 and a half feet wide and extending for the length of the building. These beds are stacked three to five high allowing only enough space between for the harvester to reach the mushrooms that will grow in a compost mixture that fills the beds (Daily Local, 9 June 1956). The first step of the growing process involves the use of carefully cultivated spawn that will eventually give birth to the desired fungi. Spawn consists of threads of mycelium grown from the spores of the mushroom in a sterilized grain mixture. The spawn is added to the compost (usually a mixture of horse manure, hay and corncobs) and allowed to spread its web like threads throughout the compost for several days (Daily Local News, 8 February 1955). After the spawn has spread throughout the compost, a thin layer of casing soil is spread over the compost. Seven to ten days later the mushrooms begin to appear. At this time they are picked. New mushrooms will sprout in their place each time they are picked until the nutrients within the compost are exhausted. This process usually takes a period of four to six weeks (Barrientos B1).

The mushrooms are grown in darkness, not because they are adversely affected by sunlight but because lighting creates troublesome heat, costs money and it is not necessary for the growing process since mushrooms do not produce chlorophyll like green plants. The temperature and humidity inside of the mushroom is carefully monitored and regulated. Manual labor is involved in all phases of production, including composting, spawning and harvesting. The mushrooms must be harvested and sorted by hand (Bussel 4). Harvesters must take care to remove dirt from the stems and keep the mushrooms free from nicks and marks that would mar its appearance (Garcia 57). Normally workers begin harvesting well before dawn to ensure that the highly perishable product gets to market within a day after being picked (Bussel 4).

Although mushroom growing produces a distinctly agricultural product, commercial mushroom growing employs undeniable aspects of industry such as indoor production, a series of distinct labor processes and carefully monitored control over temperature and ventilation (Bussel 4). This blurred distinction between agriculture and industry will come to the forefront later in this paper due to the fact that it has been the basis of litigation in the courts concerning protected rights of laborers to organize (Art Read Interview).

## **THE PRODUCT**

Mushrooms have long been an enjoyed delicacy of peoples throughout the world. Of the nearly 40,000 known species only about 1000 are edible

(Propkop). Prior to their domestication, the intrepid gourmet commonly gathered mushrooms in fields and meadows. These wild ancestors of today's mushroom would generally appear only when weather conditions of temperature and moisture were just right. Normally appearing in the spring and fall months, they would seem to vanish almost as quickly as they appeared. Legend had it that these fungi would appear at the site where elves had danced the night before. Although extremely perishable these wild mushrooms could fetch substantial prices on the markets of New York and Philadelphia in the late 1800s (Daily Local News, 18 September 1894).

The common domestic mushroom of today, *Agricus Bisporus* was first domesticated in the sewers and cellars of Paris during the 1800s. The process of producing the spawn or seed of the mushroom soon spread to England (Daily Local News, 19 January 1950).

Mushrooms reached the U.S. in the 1890s when Quaker farmers like Jacob Steyer and William Swayne imported spawn from Europe to try their hand at growing. Swayne, who is generally credited as the father of mushroom growing in the U.S., grew carnations in his greenhouse in Kennett Square. Carnations, which are grown on elevated benches, failed to utilize all the space available in the greenhouses in which they were grown. In particular the space directly under the elevated beds had always been a dead loss. In an attempt to utilize this wasted space, Swayne began cultivating mushrooms in the space under the beds. By hanging flaps of burlap from the beds above he successfully created an environment of stable temperature and humidity in which his mushrooms could thrive. (Daily Local News, 29 March 1928).

These early efforts met with sufficient success and Swayne soon realized that best results could be obtained by constructing special buildings where temperature, humidity and ventilation could be controlled. He soon erected the world's first mushroom house. Word of Swayne's success spread and the mushroom industry in Kennett Square began to grow as other farmers in the vicinity took up the hobby. The growth of the industry was slow at first. However, by the 1920s as the public's consumption of mushrooms increased and new markets opened up the industry began to grow by leaps and bounds (Daily Local News, 29 March 1928).

One significant factor responsible for the industry's growth was the development of a pure culture spawn in the early 1900s. This spawn allowed growers to cultivate desirable species only. Edward H. Jacob, one of the pioneer growers who got his start from Jacob Steyer is chiefly responsible for this development. Jacob had imported spawn from England but had only

mediocre results. He began to try his hand at making his own spawn and was so successful he soon found himself exporting his spawn to England and selling it to other mushroom growers in Pennsylvania (The Philadelphia Record, 16 September 1946). Eventually the Department of Agriculture perfected his pure culture variety of spawn which remains in use till today.

Although the birth of the mushroom industry in Kennett Square seems to have occurred by chance, its rapid growth in the area can be traced to several factors. Although most successful agricultural operations are enabled by soil and climate this was not the case in the expansion of Kennett Square's mushroom industry. The mushroom industry took off in Kennett Square primarily because of its proximity to major markets and the existence of good transportation connections with those markets. This was a necessity for such a delicate and exceedingly perishable product. Furthermore, being close to a big city in the days of the horse and buggy meant there was an ample supply of horse manure easily available for use as compost (Daily Local News, 31 January 1962).

By 1928 Chester County mushroom growers were supplying the markets of Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Detroit and many other cities within a 1000-mile radius of Kennett Square. Although definite numbers are not available from this time it is estimated that Chester County was responsible for exporting at least 12 million pounds of mushrooms during the growing season which usually lasted from October till May (Daily Local News, 29 March 1928). Although growers were successful in marketing their product here in the U.S., no substantial quantities of mushrooms (in canned form) were shipped abroad due to the cost of the U.S. product and heavy tariffs imposed by many lands (Daily Local News, 16 February 1935).

Despite the exponential growth and success of the mushroom industry in its infancy, it was clear that still very little was known by even the experienced grower as to exactly what factors were responsible for success or failure. It was often the case that seemingly identical conditions could bring success in one case and failure in another. Nevertheless, it was estimated in 1930 that approximately 500 mushroom houses dotted the land in the townships of Pennsbury, Pocopson, East and West Marlboro, London Grove and London Britain, all within a ten mile radius of Kennett Square (Daily Local News 16 January 1931). By this time Pennsylvania alone accounted for 85% of all the mushrooms grown in the U.S.

It wasn't long before the canning industry began to make the mushroom a welcome addition. Canning made it possible to ship the mushroom to more

distant parts of the country where the fresh product would not survive intact to market. Canning also made the eating of mushrooms a year round event since consumers were no longer limited to purchasing mushrooms during the cooler months of the year when growing was possible. The advent of mushroom canning and development of an extremely popular snowball strain of the common *Agricus bisporus* mushroom helped make mushroom farming an international industry.

By 1935 importation of canned mushrooms from markets in Europe and Asia began occupying a larger and larger share of the U.S. market. Mushroom growers were particularly alarmed by this trend since they had begun to rely on the canned market to an increasing extent. Domestic growers found it difficult to compete with the product from overseas since labor there was much cheaper. Furthermore, there was very little overhead involved in overseas production since most foreign mushrooms were grown in caves. A series of tariff battles ensued in the U.S. legislature. The Mushroom Growers Association (MGA), led by Walter W. Maule, repeatedly petitioned the Tariff Committee and the U.S. State Department to maintain the standards of the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Treaty Act. In spite of the tireless efforts of the MGA, the previously set tariff was cut twice before WWII and again in 1948 and 1951 as provisions of the Marshall Plan. These cuts made it increasingly difficult for U.S. growers to compete with the foreign canned product in U.S. markets (Kennett News and Advertiser, 18 May 1951). The cuts in 1948 and 1951 were particularly painful.

The use of tin for the canning of mushrooms was forbidden in 1942 due to war effort legislation presented by the tin conservation division of the WPB. This restriction drastically reduced the quantity of mushrooms canned during the war years presenting yet another setback for the area's mushroom industry. However, mushroom canning picked up dramatically right after the war as a crippled Europe and Asia began to rebuild (Kennett News and Advertiser, 24 March 1942). It was an unprecedented boom for the industry. Servicemen returning from the war entered into business with their fathers aided by government provisions which granted veterans access to lumber and other building materials at bargain prices. In the years immediately following the war, mushroom production reached an all-time high in the areas surrounding Kennett Square. This boom was short lived however. The trickle of canned mushrooms imported into the U.S. grew to a flood as overseas markets recovered and tariffs were continually reduced to aid the recovery of devastated markets in Europe and Asia. J.B. Parke, president of the Cultivated Mushroom Institute, and Walter Maule pleaded before the House of

Representatives time and time again opposing further reductions of the tariff on imported mushrooms but to no avail (Daily local News, 8 February 1955). Finally in 1956 representatives of the U.S. mushroom industry succeeded in blocking further tariff reduction but it was too late to save the canned mushroom market for U.S. growers (Daily Local News, 9 June 1956).

Despite these hardships the mushroom industry in Kennett Square and the surrounding Chester County survived and in fact continued to grow. Output in Pennsylvania increased unabated throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Production shifted from an emphasis on producing for the canned market to production for the fresh market. And although Pennsylvania's share of the nation's total output had dropped to about 60% by the middle of the 1960s (due to the spread of mushroom farming to other areas of the country), overall production in Pennsylvania had reached record levels thanks to technological advancements in the industry.

The problem the industry faced now was not how to grow more mushrooms, but rather how to sell more mushrooms. In the late 1950s, industry leaders began to focus on marketing their product to consumers. The creation of the American Mushroom Institute, affiliated with Phillips Mushrooms in Kennett Square, was instrumental in this marketing effort (27 May 1955). The campaign was a success, and U.S. consumption of mushrooms increased at a rate of 15% a year from 1960 to 1973 (Philadelphia Inquirer, 13 October 1973).

Despite losing out to a cheaper Asian product in the canned market, steady supermarket prices and the virtually unlimited potential of the fresh mushroom market lead to continued prosperity among Chester County mushroom growers throughout the 1970s. The emphasis on the fresh market meant only the growers that could produce the highest quality mushrooms in the greatest quantity could remain successful. As a result the smaller less efficient farms fell to the wayside and the superior producers grew into multi-million dollar corporations. Lost within this pattern of success and prosperity was the almost invisible population of poor migrant laborers largely responsible for the arduous task of cultivating and harvesting the mushroom crop. In the 1980s and 1990s, these migrant laborers would struggle to make their voice heard.

## **LABOR**

From its inception, mushroom farming has been a labor-intensive industry. Manual labor is involved in all phases of production, including composting, spawning and harvesting. The presence of a continuous and abundant supply



of cheap manual labor has undoubtedly postponed the mechanization of the industry. "In keeping with historical patterns of farm labor employment, the composition of the workforce in mushroom industry's has changed over time" (Bussel 4).

The industry, which was started by Pennsylvania Quakers, utilized family members and friends in the early days. The small farms of the time needed only a few hands to run the operation. As operations got larger in the 1920s, the work was largely performed by Italian immigrants (Bussel 4). Picking mushrooms is very hard and dirty work. Most people don't want to do it. However poor immigrants who came to this country with nothing constituted a willing labor force. Over time these immigrants assumed ownership positions and started farms of their own. In the 1930s and 1940s these Italian growers began to employ local youth, both white and African-American. In the 1950s, as these workers found better opportunities elsewhere, growers began recruiting poor southern whites and African-Americans. Once again the course of departure from the industry continued, and Puerto Ricans supplanted native-born workers (Bussel 5). Puerto Ricans would comprise the majority of the workforce from the late 1950s until well into the 1970s (Smith, 1992). This wave of workers came from rural areas in Puerto Rico where they worked the sugar cane crop which only provided work for a couple of months out of the year (De Leon). The mushroom industry in Chester County presented an opportunity for better pay and year round work. The familiar course of upward economic mobility among the industry's workforce would continue as poorer Mexican workers gradually replaced the Puerto Rican workforce in the late 1970s. Today approximately 98% of the workforce is composed of Mexican laborers (Art Read Interview). These Mexican workers were largely recruited through kinship networks (Bussel 5). As one Mexican immigrant recounted, "Everyone knew someone who was working in Kennett Square and they hoped someday they too would go there to pick mushrooms" (Gus Carmona-Ernst Interview).

Traditionally, area growers provided housing for these Mexican workers who often would stay in the U.S. and work for only nine or ten months before returning to their families in Mexico for a while. These mushroom camps, as they had come to be known, were notorious for their squalid living conditions. In many area camps, workers were crowded into shacks infested with rats, mice and flies. There were often gaps in the walls and roof, exposed electrical wiring, boarded up windows, broken toilets, and erratic hot water. These conditions were typical of many camps throughout Chester County in the 1970s and 1980s. In one camp, the rats in the barracks were so fat and tame

they were jokingly referred to by the workers as "conejos" which is Spanish for rabbits (Goldman B1).

The workers tolerated these outrageous living conditions primarily because, for the most part, they had nowhere else to go. They led a lonely existence as strangers in a strange land. Furthermore, many of the workers were undocumented illegal aliens who feared Immigration & Naturalization Service reprisals if they were to complain to the growers. Even the legally documented workers feared they would be fired if they complained since there were few protections for the workers under the law and replacement labor was easy to find (Henry B1). The growers themselves blamed the workers for the poor conditions. Said one grower, "You fix it all up and they tear it back down again." You can't change their way of living. All they're here for is to make a fast dollar"(Kanaly B7).

In response to the atrocious living conditions found in many of the camps, the Pennsylvania legislature passed the Seasonal Farm Labor Act in 1978. In Addition to mandating minimum hours and maximum wages, the law was intended to finally put an end to the longstanding deplorable conditions in the camps (Bussel 6; Henry B1). The law called for regular inspections of the camps by the Department of Environmental Resources (DER). The Department's Environmental Quality Board adopted regulations setting standards of decency for the mushroom camps in 1980. There were strict provisions for fines of employers in violation of these standards (Henry B1). However within a year the DER stopped inspecting almost all the mushroom camps in Pennsylvania. The Friends of Farm Workers, who alleged a conspiracy between the DER and mushroom growers, subsequently sued the DER. The FOF won the case in 1985 and forced the DER to conduct the inspections mandated in the 1978 Seasonal Farm Labor Act. This decision had mixed results.

The progress of the DER was still very slow but at least it was progress, and in some cases conditions were somewhat improved. For the most part the significant improvements only occurred within the larger, more financially secure farms that had already planned to upgrade facilities even before enforcement by the DER began. The smaller farms were much slower to make improvements. Many claimed they could not afford to bring their camps up to par and simply closed the camps. Others kept their camps open and remained in violation of the law because the DER was reluctant to enforce regulations in a heavy-handed fashion. One DER spokesperson said, "We're not in the business of shutting people down, we're willing to be reasonable"

(Kanaly B7). The FOF did not think they were being reasonable and criticized the pace of the inspections (Art Reed Interview).

In the end, the Seasonal Farm Labor Act played only a secondary role in eliminating the housing problems of the mushroom camps. Many of the worst camps simply closed down rather than complying with housing standards. Furthermore, thanks to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, labor camps were becoming a thing of the past anyway by the time the 1990s rolled around. IRCA enabled many undocumented workers to establish legal status. After achieving legal residence status many of these men began to bring their families up from Mexico. With their families now here, mushroom workers began seeking housing outside of the mushroom camps. This influx of women and children starting in the late 1980s signaled the birth of a permanent Mexican community in Chester County, and (theoretically) the end of the flow of immigrants from Mexico looking for work in the mushroom industry (Bustos "Migrant" B2).

## **IMMIGRATION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PERMANENT HISPANIC COMMUNITY IN KENNETT SQUARE**

Throughout its history, the Mexican labor force utilized by Kennett Square's mushroom growers has been composed chiefly of men who toil for long hours here in the U.S. only to send their earnings to the families they had left behind in poverty-stricken areas of Mexico (Anders "Immigrant" B1). For years, the Hispanic community in Kennett Square consisted primarily of these transient male workers who remained invisible, anonymous and cut off from the English speaking community in which they lived and worked but rarely experienced.

In today's Kennett Square, Hispanic families are commonly seen shopping in the town's supermarkets, attending the area's schools and enjoying a day in beautiful Anson B. Nixon Park. In the past ten years, Kennett Square's Hispanic community has undergone a metamorphosis. It has transformed from an underground population of transient lone males into a vibrant permanent Hispanic community. Largely responsible for this rapid transformation are changes in U.S. immigration policy ushered in by the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), and continued economic stagnation and lack of opportunity in the states of central Mexico (Robinson W1).

For most of the 1980s, Mexican immigrants who toiled in the mushroom houses of Kennett Square lived in run-down barracks-style camps provided by their employers. These camps and the workers who lived within them were

largely isolated from the rest of the community (Kanaly B7). Because of their relatively low wages and the fact that they sent the vast majority of their earnings to loved ones in Mexico, the mushroom camps were the only homes these men could afford (Pannier A23). In addition, the fact that many of the workers were illegal aliens who feared deportation further contributed to their restriction to the often squalid camps.

The plight of the mushroom picker took a decisive turn in November of 1986 when President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The landmark law would grant amnesty to those illegal aliens who had resided in the U.S. since 1982 and provide for strict sanctions against employers who knowingly hired illegal aliens in the future (Griffin 363; Shusterman 43). At the time of IRCA's inception, many of the undocumented and illegal mushroom workers, still fearful of deportation, viewed the law with considerable skepticism (Henry B2). Considering the long history of Mexico's mistrust of the U.S., this reaction is not in the least bit surprising. However, with the assistance of social service organizations and insightful employers who realized the necessity of a legal and documented workforce under the provisions of the new law, the majority of mushroom workers applied for and were subsequently granted legal resident status in the late 1980s (Michael Pia Interview).

IRCA became the most extensive amendment of U.S. immigration policy in more than twenty years. For the first time ever, it held employers accountable for the hiring of illegal aliens and imposed financial and criminal sanctions on employers who violated the law ("Illegal" 371). Nationwide, more than 3 million undocumented illegal aliens were granted legal status under the provisions of IRCA in the years following 1987, and the number of immigrants caught crossing the Mexican border dropped substantially in the period from 1986 to 1989 ("Illegal" 371).

The small town of Kennett Square is merely a microcosm of the national situation regarding illegal immigration. For decades the U.S. has relied largely on illegal immigrants to perform the low paying menial jobs that Americans don't want (Griffin 363). U.S. businesses have, for years, profited from a virtually endless supply of cheap labor provided by illegal immigrants, and although the passing of IRCA may have stemmed the tide for a time, the flow of immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere continues today.

The passage of IRCA has had its share of negative backlash, most notably the proliferation of a black market in falsified U.S. identification papers and "coyote" smuggling. Furthermore the law's passage seemed to add credence

to the growing xenophobia teeming in mid-1980s American politics. Despite the persistence of xenophobic attitudes, most economists agree that the benefits of illegal immigration considerably outweigh the negative effects on the respective economies (Griffin 364). In the case of Mexican immigration into the U.S. both sides reap the economic benefits of illegal and legal immigration. The U.S. is provided with a cheap supply of labor essential for many of its agricultural and manufacturing industries, and Mexico benefits from the estimated 6 billion dollars a year workers in the U.S. send home to their families ("Mexico's Future" 832). Furthermore, in a country such as Mexico where economic opportunities are seriously limited, immigration, legal or otherwise, provides a way out of the often desperate situation many Mexicans face. As one Mexican official commented, "If it were not for emigration we would have had a revolution by now." ("Mexico's Future" 832).

Many of the Mexican workers who made the long journey to work in the mushroom houses of Kennett Square years ago found themselves in a new and favorable situation after acquiring legal resident status. They no longer had to live in fear of deportation, hiding from authorities and cut off from their families and the society that surrounded them. Some mushroom workers left the industry to explore opportunities elsewhere after gaining resident status. The resulting labor shortage, caused by the availability of new opportunities coupled with restrictions on immigration, forced growers to raise wages for mushroom picking (Bussel 7).

Many of the Mexican workers in Kennett Square had long hoped to someday earn enough money to return to their homeland, reunite with their families, and live comfortably. However the early and mid-1990s found Mexico once again bogged down in an economic quagmire, and the mushroom workers began to realize that the only hope for the prosperity of their families would be found here in the U.S (Robinson W1). As the wife of one Mexican immigrant declared, "Leaving Mexico is no longer a decision, it's an obligation." (W1).

A large majority of Kennett Square's immigrant labor force hails from the Mexican states of Toluca and Guadalajara (Pannier A23; Bussel 5). In these regions of central Mexico the average wage is eight times less than that which can be earned picking mushrooms in Kennett Square (Griffin 363). Furthermore, unemployment in these areas is often as high as 60% (Pannier A23). These factors, coupled with provisions stipulated in IRCA which allowed the new legal residents to petition the government to bring their families to the U.S. to join them, led to an extensive influx of Mexican families into Kennett Square and its neighboring townships (Bustos "Migrant" B1).

In the early 1990s a spokesperson for the Nationalities Service Center in Philadelphia, an agency that deals with local immigration issues, predicted that the pace of immigration from Mexico to Chester County could be expected to continue at a brisk rate for the next several years. "Realistically, you could be looking at a large Hispanic population out there. It could be the next Mexican American barrio," said Gabe Labella of the NSC (Anders "Immigrant" B1). Moreover, Segio R. Bustos, a staff writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer, contended in 1991 that this influx signaled "...the birth of a permanent Mexican community in Chester County...A fragmented group of men with few ties being transformed into a community of families" (Bustos "Migrant" B1). The most concrete evidence of this demographic transformation in Kennett Square and the surrounding townships is evident in local school enrollment among migrant children which jumped from 253 in 1989 to 602 in 1995 (Robinson W8).

There is no denying the fact that a permanent Hispanic community has established itself in the heart of mushroom country. This reality has been vividly apparent to residents of Kennett Square and its adjacent townships for some time now. Clearly these immigrants were drawn to this area by the economic opportunities available, opportunities which they lacked in their homeland. Changes in U.S. immigration policies have allowed the migrant families of Kennett Square to establish themselves within this country, transforming what was once an isolated group of transient men into a permanent community. The effects of these changes on the mushroom industry itself have yet to be fully absorbed, and exactly what the future holds for the growers of Kennett Square is not yet clear. However the backbone of the mushroom industry for the past twenty years, the men whose sweat and sacrifice has sustained the industry for so long, their families and their descendants will take their rightful place in the history of a nation...a nation of immigrants.

### **THE STRIKE AT KAOLIN**

In the early morning hours of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1993, workers at Kaolin mushroom farms in Kennett Square staged an unprecedented work stoppage. The Kaolin Strike, as it has come to be known, resulted in the most significant labor dispute in the industry's history. The event held the local media's attention for months, and the issues that grew out of the strike remained under dispute in the state legislature for years to follow. However, despite the hoopla that followed the walkout, and the subsequent legislative battles, the long-term repercussions of the strike itself did relatively little to change the face of the industry.

When more than 140 Kaolin employees walked off the job that morning, at the behest of union organizers, the incident was portrayed by some media reporters and pro-

union supporters as a spontaneous work stoppage that was the result of unsatisfactory wages and the mistreatment of workers by Kaolin supervisors. Only after the company's refusal to negotiate with the striking workers did the stoppage escalate into a full-blown strike. In fact, the notion that the Kaolin Strike grew out of a genuinely impromptu event is entirely inaccurate.

In the years preceding the strike, the "Comite de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agricolas (CATA), a New Jersey based farm workers organization worked diligently in Kennett Square to organize the area's mushroom workers (Bustos "Fiery" 18)." As early as March 15<sup>th</sup> of 1993, Cindy Anders of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that a nationally recognized labor organizer was in the midst of the Kaolin employees in Kennett Square (Anders "Mission" C1). Enter Venturra Gutierrez.

Venturra Gutierrez, the son of migrant farm workers in California, had been instrumental in the organization of farm workers in both California and Texas prior to his appearance on the scene at Kaolin Mushroom Farms (Anders "Mission" C1). He came to Kennett Square at the request of CATA whose previous attempts to organize farm workers in the area had fizzled. Gutierrez however, possessed the kind of charm, charisma and savvy that growers in the area had not yet faced in their ongoing efforts to subdue any form of union uprising within the industry. He knew precisely what to say in every situation. He was a media darling and he knew exactly how to rally the workers to the union cause, said Christine Barber of the *Daily Local News* (Christine Barber Interview).

At the time of the strike, Kaolin Mushroom Farms had long possessed a good reputation as one of the better companies regarding the benefits and salaries they offered their employees. They offered some of the highest wages in the area, aided employees in attaining U.S. resident status and gave extended leaves of absence to their employees so that they could visit loved ones in Mexico without losing their jobs or the seniority they had previously attained (Michael Pia Interview). In spite of this, Kaolin was an opportune target for CATA. The company was the largest mushroom farm in Chester County and the fifth largest farm in the nation making it a desirable springboard for CATA's attempts to organize the industry as a whole (Bustos "Fiery" 17). As Michael Pia, president of Kaolin Mushroom Farms explained in a personal interview, "...if you're going to organize and make a big impact you go after the larger employers," referring to CATA's attempt to unionize the industry.

In addition to Kaolin's size, another factor contributed to CATA's targeting of Kaolin. According to Michael Pia, in the years leading up to the strike, Kaolin had experienced a period of rapid growth and expansion. As a result, Pia admits that his company's infrastructure, in terms of human resources and labor relations was not operating at its full potential. "We did not have the people on staff to sufficiently

communicate with our employees, so from that standpoint we were certainly vulnerable" (Michael Pia Interview).

The strike was not a lockout. On the first day of the strike, the company distributed flyers telling employees that they could return to their jobs which would remain open, and that replacement workers were being hired. Labor leaders claimed that the hiring of replacement workers was an attempt to break the strike. However Pia denies this allegation. "Replacement workers were brought in solely for the purpose of harvesting the crop. Mushrooms are like milking cows. If you skip a day, it has a severe economic impact. If you skip two or three days, your crop is ruined completely" (Michael Pia Interview).

Although tensions were high during the strike, they never reached a boiling point. Only minor incidents of violence or vandalism were reported. There were allegations of wrongdoing and misconduct on both sides however, and several workers were fired leading to the subsequent filing of unfair labor practices with the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board (PLRB). After 30 days of protests and demonstrations the workers returned to their jobs unconditionally, secure at least in the fact that the PLRB had ordered a union election to be held.

Through their efforts, the Kaolin Union had gained the support of labor organizations like the Teamsters and the Retail, Wholesale & Department Store workers union (RWDSU) (Barber "Supporters A34). The independent union engaged in a brief affiliation with the RSWDU that soon fell apart. The lack of a national sponsor did not thwart the young union however. And in mid-July of 1993 a union election was conducted by the PLRB. The official election tally was 130 to 102, in favor of a union (Barber "Union Assured" A1). This event marked the beginning of an intense series of courtroom battles that lasted more than five years, and ultimately decided the fate of the "Union de Trabajadores de Kaolin".

Despite the vote in favor of unionization, Kaolin appealed the decision of the PLRB that forced them to recognize and negotiate with the fledgling union. This appeal was based on the grounds that the election was invalid due to an incompetent translator provided by the PLRB, the presence of unauthorized persons in the voting booth and the fact that several workers were turned away from the voting booths because they lacked the necessary identification. Both sides agreed that the election could have been conducted better, but farm workers' advocates claimed the results were decidedly pro-union, and that the election should stand.

Kaolin was subsequently vilified, both in the press and by farm workers' advocates who claimed that Kaolin's appeal was nothing more than an unlawful stall tactic. However, in the subsequent hearings held to determine the elections' validity, it was



proven that several workers were turned away from the voting both because they lacked the proper identification. This occurred in spite of the fact that prior to the election the PLRB agreed that these workers would be allowed to vote. According to legal precedent this fact alone was enough to invalidate the July election and order a new one. In fact that was exactly how the hearing examiner saw it and the election was overturned (Michael Pia Interview).

This decision led to an appeal by Friends of Farmworkers attorney Arthur Read who was now representing the union (Robinson "Union" C2). Aside from asserting that the election should stand on the basis of principle, many union supporters feared that, if mandated, a new election would fail. The unionization movement, by this time, had lost the momentum that Gutierrez, now long gone, had brought to it. Furthermore, several pro-union workers had been fired for misconduct during the strike, and Kaolin had since made substantial efforts to improve relations with their employees. There were also allegations that the company had undergone a campaign of blacklisting, screening out any pro-union workers in the hiring process. In fact several unfair labor practices were filed by the FOF in regard to this accusation. Kaolin President Michael Pia called the blacklisting claims "ridiculous".

The appeal by the FOF went before the PLRB, and the hearing examiner's decision was overturned in November of 1997. This decision forced Kaolin to negotiate with the union. "It's a major victory, said Arthur Read, "Before, whatever the employer wanted to do, he did it. Now, he must sit down and negotiate the terms of employment with the workers". Michael Pia responded, "I don't see it as benefiting my employees, just as consuming my time. The company has improved a lot. I don't think the majority of my employees would vote for a union today." (Qt. From Asquith "Court" B2). Kaolin subsequently appealed the decision of the PLRB to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. That appeal was denied, and by the end of 1998 the company begrudgingly agreed to negotiate with the union (Asquith "Win" C2).

By the early spring of 1999 Kaolin had begun negotiations with union representatives. In an April interview Pia was confident that the balance between pay scale and benefits that his company has achieved in the years leading up to labor negotiations was to the liking of his employees (Mike Pia Interview). For the most part, the issues that precipitated the strike in 1993 have long since been resolved internally by Kaolin. The strike itself, and subsequent unionization of the Kaolin workers was no doubt the catalyst in this process. However, now that the major issues had been resolved, there was relatively little left for the union to negotiate. How this union will justify its existence to the workers it represents is yet to be seen, but now at least the workers can feel secure in the fact that they have a voice that demands to be heard. It is in this fact, rather than the profit motivated business of creating unions, that the true nobility of Arthur Read and the FOF's efforts is apparent.

## THE FUTURE OF MUSHROOM FARMING IN KENNETT SQUARE

As the mushroom industry's current labor force ages and the children of these latest immigrants move on to greater economic opportunities, it is difficult to say just who will harvest the mushrooms of the future. In an industry increasingly dominated by larger and larger firms forced by government officials to play by the rules stipulated by IRCA, the question of labor supply is a perplexing one. There are plenty of laborers abroad who are willing to handle the task of harvesting mushrooms. But will the Federal government allow it? Will the Federal government make an exception to the rule solely for the purpose of saving the hundred-year old tradition of mushroom farming in Kennett Square? That's not likely to happen, and today, with automation in the mushroom industry far from a reality, a new influx of immigrant laborers is exactly what it appears it will take to preserve Kennett Square's tradition of mushroom farming into the indefinite future. On the other hand, similar labor shortages pose a dilemma for many industries throughout the U.S. so it is certainly not far-fetched to envision future changes in U.S. immigration policy that would accommodate Chester County's mushroom industry. However in the era of NAFTA and increasing free trade across the globe one may wonder if mushroom farming might simply be better served elsewhere on the globe. Nevertheless if history tells us anything it should be unequivocally clear that Kennett Square's mushroom farmers won't fade quietly into the night. The ingenuity of the area's mushroom growers has enabled them to conquer all obstacles thus far. They possess a unique tradition of beating the odds no matter how they are stacked. It would certainly be unwise to bet against them.

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